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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: MILF DISTANCES SELF FROM JOLO FIGHTING AS
CASUALTIES MOUNT

REF: MANILA 630

1. (SBU) Summary. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) has clearly distanced itself from the ongoing fighting in Sulu Province and has now offered to broker a cease-fire. The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) leadership has also called for restraint, as fighting stretched into the fifth day, with more than 100 militants and government troops reportedly dead. According to the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and media accounts, an AFP battalion commander was killed by mortar attack and the fighting has so far displaced around 3,000 people. Observers have noted that Nur Misuari, whose continued incarceration is at the center of the fighting, could provide a calming effect on the militants. The AFP has vowed that the enemy forces face "surrender or nothing." End Summary.

MILF not a party to the fight

2. (SBU) The MILF, in a February 11 press statement, offered to broker a cease-fire in the ongoing hostilities in Sulu Province (Jolo Island). Mohagher Iqbal, the MILF's Vice Chairman for Information Affairs, further called for a cessation of further offensive actions, while citing the MILF's "modest capacity" to broker a cease-fire by using its contacts with the GRP and its "open line with (their) brothers in the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF)." The MILF spokesman told the media that all MILF troops in Sulu are "under orders . . . to observe the existing cease-fire agreement with the government," further clarifying remarks earlier this week that the ongoing fighting had nothing to do with the MILF.

3. (SBU) Separately, MNLF Secretary General Istad Mushiri has called for self-restraint, while nonetheless rejecting the AFP's call for surrender. He stressed that the Misuari loyalists -- known as the Misuari Renegade Group (MRG) or the Misuari Breakaway Group (MBG) -- are fighting for a "just cause" (reftel). However, Mushiri denied publicly that the Misuari loyalists are fighting alongside the terrorist Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG).

Death Toll Mounts

4. (SBU) Fighting continued February 10 and 11 in several hamlets on Jolo Island, and officials on the ground and in the AFP assessed the prospects for an imminent cease-fire as bleak. Over 100 militants and government troops have been killed in the fighting so far. The AFP lost a battalion commander (a lieutenant colonel) in a mortar attack on February 10. Embassy contacts in Jolo noted that the situation remains "tense." The AFP continues to soften enemy targets with air and artillery strikes, and commanders in the field reported the capture of some enemy strongholds. Chief of AFP SouthCom, Lt Gen Alberto Braganza, told the press, "It's either surrender or nothing."

5. (SBU) Officials and visitors in Jolo have estimated at least 3,000 internally displaced persons, all of whom have apparently gone to live with relatives or friends outside the combat areas. As far as Embassy can determine, there is so far no official GRP or NGO assistance available for these IDPs. Visitors have praised a helpful role played here by the Philippine National Police (PNP), most of whom are locals. A small minority of AFP units involved in the fighting are from the MNLF forces who joined the AFP after the 1996 MNLF/GRP peace accord, but most come from outside Sulu province, and few even of the Muslim troops are ethnic Tausug (the local majority).

Misuari's Central Role

6. (SBU) The role of detained former MNLF Chairman Nur Misuari (controversial one-time governor of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, arrested in 2002 after trying to lead a rebellion against the government) remains shadowy but central. There are no indications that he explicitly incited

the hostilities, although many of his loyalists under arms have specifically demanded his speedy trial or release on bail. The GRP has not indicated when his trial -- still subject to vague legal and bureaucratic delays -- will move forward. Current ARMM Governor Parouk Hussin, who visited Jolo on February 11, has also called for an expeditious trial for Misuari. Civil society contacts have emphasized that Misuari could help rein in his followers, by publicly asking his followers to lay down their arms, but that he has so far not done so.

17. (SBU) Comment: The militants remain a formidable and lethal adversary, although but time likely is not on their side, given their diminishing stocks of ammunition, superior numbers of the AFP forces, and apparent war weariness of the local population.
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